This is an author produced version of a paper published in Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research
This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the published paper:

Pia Williams and Sonja Sheridan
Collaboration as one aspect of quality: A perspective of collaboration and pedagogical quality in educational settings

Access to the published version may require subscription. Published with permission from:
Taylor & Francis
Collaboration as one aspect of quality: A perspective of collaboration and pedagogical quality in educational settings

PIA WILLIAMS and SONJA SHERIDAN
Göteborg University, Sweden

The aim of this article is to problematise and discuss collaboration between children as a means of learning and as an essential aspect of pedagogical quality in educational settings. In theories of learning, children’s social interaction and collaboration are highlighted as fundamental to their learning. This implies that children’s opportunities to learn from each other in educational contexts constitute a decisive aspect of pedagogical quality, which focuses on possibilities for learning and learning processes in the educational system. At the same time, collaboration is questioned as a means of motivating learning beyond children’s own expected potential. We suggest that it might depend on the way education is organised and carried out, the view of knowledge and what is regarded as valuable content in relation to how collaboration is defined, described and thought about in both research and practice.

Keywords: Pedagogical quality; Peer collaboration; Preschool; School
**Introduction**

A learning environment of high quality in which children of all ages are challenged to learn and stretch beyond their own expected potential ought to be the main aim of any educational system. The constitution of such a learning environment involves a complexity of interacting and intertwined aspects, important ones being physical resources, the teachers’ competence, attitudes and approach, content, organisation of activities and children’s and adolescents’ possibilities for learning from each other.[i]

The aim of this paper is to problematize and discuss collaboration between children as a means of learning and as an essential aspect of pedagogical quality in educational settings. Our intentions are to discuss constructive aspects of collaborative learning, even if collaboration also can lead to destructive actions such as exclusion, defeat etc. Important to emphasise is that collaborative learning is not to be seen as a polarisation to individual learning and that learning in itself is not regarded as high quality. Even if it is more or less impossible to avoid learning in social interaction, another delimitation of this article is that the focus is strictly on learning through collaboration in spontaneous and/or constructed situations in educational settings such as preschool and school. Furthermore, we intend to highlight and question whether collaboration in itself is enough to challenge children’s learning beyond their expected potential. The questions at issue are: What aspects and situations promote collaborative learning situations of high pedagogical quality in educational settings? Does collaboration challenge children to stretch their limits or achieve beyond their own expected capacity in learning situations?

Collaboration is often defined as a situation in which two or more people work together towards a common goal. In theories of learning, collaboration is defined as a mutual engagement between members in a group when they try to solve a problem together (Dillenbourg *et al.*, 1996). Damon and Phelps (1989) emphasize equality and mutual engagement as two important dimensions of peer collaboration. According to their studies, peer collaboration contributes to, and might even be necessary for several achievements such as children’s understanding of justice, growth of self-esteem, willingness to share and care, and ability to handle symbolic thinking, as well as the fostering of communication skills and the development of creativity and critical thinking. They also imply that collaboration motivates children to learn skills that none of them had before. A shared interest seems to be one fundamental dimension of collaboration to develop the skills above (Williams, 2001). Williams also found that young children collaborated constructively when there was a
common problem to be solved, despite age or sex. This ought to have the same validity in an educational context, as theories of learning clearly show that children learn and develop through, among other things, collaboration and togetherness (Piaget, 1959; Vygotskij, 1978, 1986; Säljö, 2000).

Through previous research we have gained knowledge of qualities that characterise a high quality environment in preschool and school (Sylva, 1994; Sheridan, 2001, manuscript; Sylva, et al., 1999; Siraj Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002). Qualities regarded as more important than others include the qualifications of the teacher, the existence of overall goals and cooperation with parents (NAEYC, 1991). An interesting fact is that despite an enormous amount of research into both quality and children’s collaboration for learning, these are seldom linked. To our knowledge, children’s collaboration is not an explicit criterion of quality. This is one point that has become obvious in our research, and we believe that it should be highlighted.

The point of departure is that collaborative learning and pedagogical quality are intertwined as the focus of pedagogical quality is on possibilities for learning and learning processes in the educational system. To evaluate quality from this perspective includes an evaluation of what goes on in pedagogical processes, or in other words, in the relation between what goes on in the encounter between the teacher and a child or between children of all ages, and the content out of which a child is about to constitute knowledge (Sheridan, 2001). That is why the quality of an educational setting, among other things, ought to be evaluated and observed through children’s togetherness, shared learning and learning from each other, their communication, discussion, argumentation, play, exploration, participation in decision-making and possibilities for influencing ongoing activities in preschool and school. Collaboration between children can therefore be seen as a dimension of pedagogical quality. Still, the current issue is whether collaboration is enough to motivate children to achieve beyond their own expected capacity.

Theoretical point of view
Theoretical approach is based on an interactionistic perspective in which individuals and the environment influence and are influenced by each other in a continuous interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Confrey, 1995; Bruner, 1996). In this perspective it is through interaction people obtain ways of thinking, speaking and executing actions (Säljö, 2000). The knowledge of people and institutions is constituted and maintained through interaction in
specific cultural contexts (Evaldsson, et al., 2001; Rogoff, 2003). The ecological framework of Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains how micro-systems (family), meso-systems (preschool and school) and macro-systems (economic and social policies) of cultures and societies influence and affect children’s learning. All systems interact with one another and must be taken into consideration to fully understand children’s experiences of and possibilities for learning in preschool and school. From this perspective, these institutions can be seen as a meeting place of values, attitudes and intentions for learning both from home and society, and as such they are a link between the macro- and micro-levels of society.

The cognitive, social and emotional aspects of children’s development cannot be separated as they constitute an integrated whole where children learn by experiencing, acting and communicating with the environment, which in turn interacts with them in various ways (Pramling, 1994; Marton & Both, 1997). Central to Vygotskij’s (1986) theory is the idea that children who are guided by an adult or a more competent peer who is participating in cultural activities are given the best opportunities to internalise or to build "tools for thinking". Children are also capable of teaching each other in this way, to use more advanced methods, for example problem-solving situations, because they are then given the opportunity to practice in a social context. The idea of a zone of proximal development holds that children’s development is advanced by participating in activities that are slightly above their current level of competence, and differentiates between what a child can master on its own and with the help of others. Vygotskij emphasises that much of what we learn is learnt from others, and the key to social learning is the capacity for imitating and developing higher mental functions. This is also claimed by Piaget (1973), who describes that two processes of socialisation exist, and that one is more important than the other from the perspective of social development. He found that children socialise differently among friends than with adults. In communication with friends the child oscillates between the use of the individual or the collective monologue and an exchange of thoughts through dialogue. He believed that the superiority of adults sometimes hinders discussion and cooperation, while the equality among children promotes social interaction, which has a positive influence on the socialisation of a child’s mind. The opposite also applies; the equality of friends can hinder the child from investigating and questioning the adults who might have the answer (Piaget, 1973, p. 53). For Piaget cooperation is social interaction among individuals who regard themselves as equal and treat each other as such.
Pedagogical quality and peer collaboration

Pedagogical quality is based on an interactive perspective as it is embedded in, takes shape and develops in a complicated relationship between individuals and the environment, a process in which the individual and the environment are interdependent. An interactive perspective of pedagogical quality in an educational setting means that the level of quality depends not only on how the environment is constituted to meet, extend and challenge the experience and intentions of children, but also on how the child can influence and form both the overall environment and his or her own learning process. Furthermore, individual and social development shape each other, and the key constituents in this co-shaping process are forms of human interaction and tools. Experience and context intermingle in such a way that "social processes guide and direct development and/or how developmental processes contribute to a reorganisation of social processes" (Winegar & Valsiner, 1992, p. 7).

A pedagogical perspective of quality originates from research and proven experience in preschool and school, inferring that certain aspects of quality benefit a child’s learning and development more than others do. These characteristics of quality can be defined and evaluated. It is a broad perspective that takes into account the norms, values, traditions, cultural specifics, contextual specifics and heritage of society. At the same time, it closes in and focuses on how various pedagogical processes in preschool and school are composed to take into account the right of the child to learn, to participate, to be respected, listened to and counted on as a worthy member of society. The core of pedagogical quality is in the interaction as it is constituted in, takes shape and develops in the encounter between the child and the teacher and between children. How this meeting turns out depends on the competence of the teacher to positively combine the short and long-term goals of society with the child’s own interests and goals for learning. The challenge is to combine them in such a way that the child maintains his or her curiosity to explore the world and develop an urge for life-long learning (Sheridan, 2001; Sheridan, manuscript).

Children learn through communicating with and imitating other people. That is why peer collaboration is an important aspect of pedagogical quality. Dialogues between children are a collective exchange of ideas, and through communication children can be introduced to new ways of thinking. Children’s own thoughts are influenced by the exchange of thoughts that takes place between them (Vygotskij, 1978, 1986). Corsaro (1997) found that the concepts of sharing and gaining control influence children’s participation in initial peer cultures. In preschool and the early school years, children and adolescents enjoy doing things
together. When children collaborate, generate shared meanings and coordinate play with peers in different tasks, they have to deal with conflicts in their daily lives. Such conflicts contribute to the social organisation of peer groups, the reaffirmation of cultural values, and the individual development and display of self. Through interaction with peers, children can learn that they can regulate social bonds on the basis of the criteria that emerge from their personal needs and social contextual demands. But they also learn that their peers will not always accept them immediately, since a child often has to convince others of his/her merits as a playmate and sometimes anticipate and accept exclusion (Corsaro, 1997, 1985).

Several of the empirical studies referred to in this article emphasise a sociocultural perspective on learning and development, where learning is an integral part of social practice, and participation in social practices is the primary phenomenon in learning. It is said that human beings are communicative by nature, and it is through communicating with others we learn about ourselves (Säljö, 2000). In communication and dialogue with each other, children share their experiences, ideas, see things from different perspectives, evaluate and re-evaluate their knowledge and learn how to deal with various situations, or in other words, they constitute meaning of the world. In so doing, they gain new knowledge and see things in other ways than they did before (Marton & Booth, 1997).

In theories of learning, children’s social interaction and collaboration are highlighted as fundamental to their learning. Their opportunities to learn from each other in educational contexts therefore constitute one decisive aspect of pedagogical quality. So what is our reason for questioning collaboration as a means of motivating learning, or rather, the way collaboration is defined, described and seems to be executed in practice? Several aspects stand out clearly and will be discussed in this article.

**Peer collaboration in educational settings**

Studies of pedagogical quality and children’s peer learning are analysed here from a perspective of collaboration between children in relation to theories of learning and pedagogical quality in educational settings. In Sweden, children have the right to learn according to the national goals and to influence their own learning processes and what goes on in their own pre-school and school (Ministry of Education and Science, 1994, 1994/98, 1998). The basic democratic values are stressed, and learning should be based upon the interaction between adults and children as well as children learning from each other. Competences such as collaboration, power of initiative, flexibility, a reflective attitude, being
active, communicative skills etc. (EU, 1996) are also emphasised as well as the traditional academic skills.

Traditional socialisation theory and traditional ways of teaching have been linked to the notion that knowledge in school is best mediated by a competent adult to an incompetent and passive child (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Viewing the child-to-child relation as an asset has not been obvious in school tradition. However, for young people interaction and collaboration with peers are essential factors in their lives. Focusing on the child-child relation, the active child will step forward when the struggle about participation, competing, gaining access, gaining positions and discussions about what is right or wrong becomes important (Frønes, 1994; Corsaro, 1985). Janson (1997) claims that extensive research has amply demonstrated the beneficial effects of peer relations and collaboration on social development. From a pedagogical perspective of quality educational institutions such as preschool and school should accept a specific responsibility, not only for encouraging learning and intellectual achievement, but also for creating a constructive peer culture that fosters interaction and negotiation. Pre-school and school could be seen as intermediate areas with unique opportunities for stimulating equality-oriented social relations between peers.

Collaboration and learning in educational settings have been studied by Williams (2001), who video-observed and interviewed 75 children, age 1-9 years. The studies show that situations constantly arise between children where they communicate and interact with each other in different ways. One goal for children is to acquire specific knowledge and skills enabling them to participate in the existing peer culture. Children learn from each other, for example, how to be an accepted playmate, how to gain access to an ongoing activity or how to behave together with peers in different situations. Teaching others and being taught by peers involve children learning from each other regardless of age and sex, form of communication (verbal versus non verbal), competence (novice versus expert) in different contexts. Children have different levels of competence and experience, depending on the content in focus. It is therefore important to view children’s collaboration in context. When discussing children’s collaboration, Williams (op. cit.) emphasises the presence of adults as well as their awareness of the importance of communication and interaction as prerequisites for solving problems in a group of children.

The teacher’s presence and pedagogical awareness were also aspects that Sheridan (2001) found to be characteristic of preschools and schools that were evaluated as being of high pedagogical quality. In a Swedish study of children’s conceptions of participation and
influence in preschool (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001), the quality of various preschool settings was evaluated with ECERS (for ECERS see Harms & Clifford, 1980; Kärrby, 1989; Andersson & Löfgren, 1994; Andersson, 1999). After the results of the external evaluations had been examined, three preschool units deemed to be of low quality and three of high quality were selected for in-depth studies. Thirty-nine five-year-old children from these preschool units were interviewed about their conceptions of decision-making and how they experienced their possibilities for exercising influence in their preschool setting. The result shows that it is vital for them to participate in decision-making. However, their participation in decision-making processes mostly occurs among themselves and during play. The children relate their understanding of decision-making to experiences gained through play, and among friends who are playing together, decision-making seems to follow certain rules. Most of the children said that: “when we are playing together, either no one or every one decides” (Sheridan, 2001, p. 180).

It also seems that play and collaboration help children in preschool to learn and understand the importance of taking turns and reciprocity. The analyses show that when children play together and take turns: "then I say: shall we take turns and swing in that ring?", they experience that they are participating on equal terms and are exercising influence and making common decisions: "then we stand there and talk, I decide or maybe she does" (op.cit., 2001, p. 180).

In play one child often takes the initiative and the other children regard this child as "the player". The other children see the player as creative and inventive, and they often choose to play with this child as it gives them a chance to go beyond their own potential while playing. Thus the previously discussed “zone of proximal development” (Vygotskij, 1978) can be related to the collaboration and shared learning that takes place between children during play in preschool. The interpretation is that children in preschool prefer to play with the child regarded as a competent "player" as it gives them the opportunity to extend their own understanding and to adopt complex roles in play. One child expressed this as: "but I prefer to play with Pelle, because he’s always made up new games.” Collaboration between children stimulates creativity and explorative learning, and the results of this study show that it is an important aspect of pedagogical quality in educational settings. However, some questions remain, which we intend to come back to, as peer collaboration in preschool appears to differ from that in school.
Research shows (Österlind, 1998) that the role of the child changed when the development in school involved going from classroom teaching to individual work. One could say that the child has changed from being part of an orchestra to being a solo performer; each child is working on his/her own career rather than advancing together. When children work individually at their own pace and with different subjects and contents as well as having individual contact and conversations with the teacher, they will be weaker as a collective, leading to less influence as a group (op.cit.).

Group interviews with the children (The Agency for National Education, 2003) show that the most common work form in school is individual work and spontaneous collaboration, meaning that children work either individually or spontaneously together two and two, for example, in English, chemistry, maths etc. Most children said that they preferred a balanced education, i.e. a mixture of individual and group work as well as lectures and teacher guidance. During observations in classrooms the children were often seen in spontaneous situations of collaboration with friends sitting next to them. Now and then various constellations of group work formed. On a rhetorical level they praised collaboration and described its benefits as follows: “it is good to collaborate as it makes you see things from different viewpoints, we can share the workload between us”, and as one child expressed it “someone knows something, another knows something else and together we know a lot and learn from each other” (children in grades/forms 5 and 9 in school).

Children also described essential conditions for working together in school. Fundamental is a structure, where work is organised based on an attitude that promotes collaboration. The size of the group is important, and for example during work with different projects a group of 2-3 children seems to be the best. This agrees with other research findings in the area (Veenman, Kenter & Post, 1999).

Being able to choose the ones you work with is another important aspect for children. However, in organised group work the teachers often want to split groups in order to make children work in different constellations, to gain varied experience, and to avoid exclusion. The guidance and support of the teacher throughout the work is also important. According to the children’s statements, it is mostly the other way round; during group work the teacher is often invisible and absent, leaving them without the necessary support. The most essential aspect seems to be that all members in the group should contribute to the whole, and that all members are seen as individuals contributing different kinds of knowledge (The Agency for National Education, 2003).
Despite the spontaneous collaboration that occurs between children in school, they seem if possible to avoid organised group work. From the analyses of both observations and interviews, it became clear that most children prefer to work by themselves instead of working together in projects or other organised group activities. The reasons for not working together (unless they have elected to do so themselves) are illustrated in the following three statements:

- To avoid other children from “getting a free ride” – children prefer to work by themselves in situations when they feel that other children take advantage of their work without contributing to their common assignment.

- To carry out their own intentions - some children are not willing to negotiate when it comes to attitudes, values, content etc., and instead of compromising they prefer to do it their own way.

- Individual judgement - the educational system is built on individual marks even if children are expected to collaborate, and some children say that they want to be judged on their own performance in school.

From an international perspective the same picture seems to emerge. Wood & O’Malley (1996) show a gloomy picture in their studies of peer collaboration in English schools. Children are not collaborating enthusiastically, and there are few signs of constructive work. Some of the explanations given for why working in groups does not work are: how the group is constructed, the content of the given problems related to the children, relations between the children, sex and status in the group. Galton & Williamson (1992) report that many children find working together in a group suspect, because they experience a contradiction between how they are expected to behave when working individually in the classroom (working in silence and fast) and when working with others, i.e. communicating and interacting with their peers. The children sometimes get confused when the teachers give prominence to collaborative school assignments but test their knowledge and skills individually.

**Conclusion**

Collaboration between children is one important aspect of pedagogical quality in educational settings. Features/characteristics that promote collaboration in educational settings are described in this article by children as an admitting organisation and attitude. Having small group constellations where the members can relate to one another is another valuable aspect.
Continuous support, guidance and confirmation from the teacher, individually as well as on a group-level, are also vital.

Finally, research has undoubtedly demonstrated that collaboration in educational settings is an important factor in intellectual achievement, but also in interaction and negotiation, which stimulate equality-oriented social relations between peers. However, children’s collaboration in preschool and school differ. In school collaboration between children is often restricted and/or takes place in organised forms and their common work are generally individually evaluated. In preschool it is the children who take initiative to collaboration and they collaborate in play and under their own rules and agreements. From the empirical studies above, it is quite obvious that children in both preschool and school collaborate spontaneously when opportunities occur. When group activities are organised in school by the teacher, something seem to happen with the adolescents’ motivation to collaborate, which is not fully explained by research. The question is: Why do children avoid the kind of learning which embraces mutual involvement in organised learning situations, despite verbal expressions of the extended knowledge a group possesses?

We suggest that it might depend on the way education is organised and carried out, the view of knowledge and what is regarded as valuable content in relation to how collaboration is defined, described and thought about in both research and practice. It also seems as if something is missing in the way collaboration is defined, discussed and thought about in both research and practice. A dimension that could motivate children to stretch to the limits of or beyond their own expected capacity through collaboration.

Note
[1] In this article, the term child is used for both children and adolescents up to 18 years of age following the definition of child in the UN Convention (1989).
References


*Educational Psychology in Practice*, 11(4), 4-9.

